

THIS MONTH

IN THE NOT TOO DISTANT PAST

With an eye on National Reading Year, **John Davis** remembers a selection of female writers



If you are perusing this article, I am most likely preaching to the converted but did you know that this year, 2026, has been designated National Reading Year. Apparently, it is a Department of Education initiative that is being delivered by the National Literacy Trust with the aim of boosting literacy, fostering a love of reading and tackling the country's declining engagement with all things literary.

To acknowledge this worthy campaign, this month's feature focuses on three authors, a poet, a novelist and a writer of children's stories. All three are women who, in order to achieve their status, had to surmount problems and difficulties both literary and personal.

SYLVIA PLATH:

Born in America in 1932, the poet and novelist Sylvia Plath pioneered the genre of confessional

poetry. It focuses on highly individual and intimate issues including personal trauma, mental illness and suicide. It is a way in which writers became highly introspective in an effort to distance themselves from the major world issues of the twentieth century including The Holocaust and the Cold War. Plath had been writing poetry from an early age, winning several literary competitions as a child and having work published in leading magazines.

Plath married fellow poet Ted Hughes in 1956 and the couple settled in Britain. They had two children before separating in 1962. The most well known of Plath's works are *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960), *Ariel* (1965) and the novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) which is semi-autobiographical and charts her own life-long battling with severe depression. *The Bell Jar*, rigid and transparent, mimics the way depression distorts

perception, making the outside world look skewed.

Sylvia Plath took her own life aged thirty leaving behind a large number of unfinished manuscripts, letters and journal entries. *The Collected Poems* which were published in 1981 was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Literature. She is one of only four people to have received this honour posthumously.

GEORGE ELIOT:

Like many female authors of the time, Mary Ann Evans was forced to use a male pen name in order to get publishers 'on-side'. Under the guise of George Eliot, Mary Ann Evans wrote seven novels but also penned poetry and worked as both a journalist and a translator.

Among her best-known novels are *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Middlemarch* (1871-72). Virginia Woolf has described *Middlemarch* as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people".

Mary was educated in religious boarding schools until she was sixteen when, following the death of her mother, she returned home to become housekeeper to her father and younger siblings. Her writing ambitions had largely been stifled while looking after her family but when her father died, she went to work as a writer and editor for a left-wing journal, *The Westminster Review*. She also became the centre of gossip and scandal by living openly with George Henry Lewes even though he was married to someone else.

Before she embarked on writing novels she decided on the pen name George Eliot, George from 'husband' Lewes and Eliot because it was "a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word". It was also a way of separating her personal life from public scrutiny.

Following the critical acclaim of *Adam Bede*, her real identity was soon uncovered but this did not affect her popularity as a novelist as other major works soon followed. She died in December 1880 at the age of 61 and due to her denial of Christian faith was buried in Highgate Cemetery, incidentally not far from the grave of Karl Marx. In 1980 a memorial stone was rightly erected in her honour in Westminster Abbey's Poets Corner.

BEATRIX POTTER:

The author of children's stories who gave us such household names as Peter Rabbit, Mrs. Tiggly-Winkle and Jemima Puddle Duck was also a pioneering entrepreneur, an expert mycologist and a conservationist, bequeathing sizeable tracts of Lake

District land to the National Trust.

Beatrix Potter was born into an upper middle-class family and had an isolated childhood being educated by a series of governesses. Long holidays spent in Scotland, the Lake District and Wales though gave her an abiding love of the landscape and she became a skilled illustrator of local floral and fauna. Her particular interest was in fungi where her research made her one of leading experts on mycology in the country.

When it came to writing and illustrating children's stories she was greatly influenced by *Aesop's Fables*, the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. It was in letters to friends and relatives that she first began to tell short illustrated stories. Finding a publisher though proved difficult and the first tales were published at her own expense. Eventually after many rejections, the books were taken on by Frederick Warne and Co and, in October 1902, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was published and became an immediate hit. Working in conjunction with her editor, Norman Warne, she published two or three books a year until 1922 when other interests began to replace her writing. Forever the canny businesswoman, Potter made and patented a Peter Rabbit doll in 1903 and other related merchandise followed including colouring books, wallpaper, board games and baby blankets.

When Norman Warne died, she used her publishing earnings and a small inheritance to purchase Hill Top Farm near Lake Windermere where, with the help of a tenant farmer, she raised livestock. In 1909 she acquired another local farm and became heavily involved in the life of the local community. Her interest then turned to breeding the indigenous Herdwick sheep before she acquired Troutbeck Park Farm with even more land to extend this interest.

When she died in 1943 Beatrix Potter left some 14,000 acres to the National Trust including sixteen farms, cottages and herds of cattle and sheep. It enabled preservation of the land that is now included in the Lake District National Park and boosted the continuation of traditional fell farming.

Semi-retired and living in Lyme Regis, John Davis started working life as a newspaper journalist before moving on to teach in schools, colleges and as a private tutor. He is a history graduate with Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University with a particular interest in the History of Education and Twentieth Century European History.